

VZCZCXYZ0001
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBO #7622/01 2952232
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 222232Z OCT 07
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9688
INFO RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 9451
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ OCT 8988
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 5545
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA PRIORITY 0741
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 6178
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 4129
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCNDTA/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1856

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 007622

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/17/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: META AT RISK: ELECTIONS VISIT TO VILLAVICENCIO

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer - 1.5 (b,d)

Summary

¶1. (U) On September 26-28, we met with political party leaders, candidates, incumbents, and civil society representatives in Meta to discuss the October 28 local elections. The civil society group--the Electoral Observation Mission (MOE)--considers Meta at high risk for violence and fraud. Corruption is a serious concern in the campaigns for mayor and governor, with politicians and illegal armed groups fighting for control of oil royalties and government contracts. The GOC is focused on providing security for candidates and voters, but a continued FARC and criminal group presence in many areas, the large number of displaced persons, and limited infrastructure are major challenges. End Summary.

TURBULENT PAST

¶2. (U) Since 2004 there have been eight governors in Meta and thirteen mayors in Villavicencio--with most of that number removed from office after being found guilty of corruption or other serious crimes. Several candidates running for governor or mayor face investigation by the Prosecutor General's office (Fiscalia) or the Inspector General's Office (Procuraduria). Many of the candidates in the region are part of long-time political machines that have dominated local government for years. Asked whether elections would make a difference for the political future of Meta, Conservative gubernatorial candidate Carlos Enrique Vaca, explained, "nothing will change after these elections, it's all about money, contracts and royalties. It will take years to transform the system, maybe even a generation."

META: HIGH RISK

¶3. (C) There are 29 municipalities in Meta, and MOE considers 22 of those to be at high risk for possible violence or corruption. The homicide rate in Meta is three times the national average, primarily due to fighting among the FARC, narcotraffickers, other criminal groups, and the security

forces. Nearly half of Meta's population lives in Villavicencio, the capital.

¶4. (C) Meta is one of the FARC's main coca-growing zones, and fierce fighting between the group and GOC security forces has led to substantial displacement of the rural population. In the 2006 presidential elections, only 15-25% of the eligible electorate in south-west Meta was able to vote. Fiscal German Rossi Casallas said fighting in the eastern part of the department between new criminal groups has also escalated. Defensoria conflict analyst Gustavo Robayo claims illegal armed groups continue to recruit in the region and are trying to impact elections. At highest risk are the municipalities of Vista Hermosa, Puerto Rico, San Juan de Arama, Mesetas and Villavicencio.

¶5. (C) There have been at least a dozen reported attacks and assassination attempts against candidates in Meta in 2007. On September 25, the Alternative Liberal Movement's candidate for town council, Robinson Salazar Herrera, was assassinated. On October 8, a grenade was thrown into the house of Erminson Cardenas, U Party mayoral candidate in La Macarena, and on October 16 the FARC attacked the political headquarters of Wilson Munoz Cardenas, U party mayoral candidate in Puerto Rico. Both candidates survived the attacks. Many in Meta believe the Liberal Party, Conservative Party, U Party, and Cambio Radical candidates are tied to criminal groups, while the FARC supports the leftist Polo Democratico.

OIL ROYALTIES AND GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS

¶6. (U) The battle for control of departmental contracts and oil royalties influences every element of politics in Meta. Governor Juan Manuel Gonzalez, Villavicencio Mayor Hector Manuel Caamano, and several candidates and civil society members told us Meta's oil royalties represented almost USD \$125 million in 2006. In Castilla la Nueva, for example, with only 6,000 inhabitants, oil generated \$16 million in revenues for municipal coffers in 2006. Many companies seeking government contracts are funding political candidates with the understanding they will be awarded local contracts if the candidate wins. The oil contracts, construction, and health service contracts are most valuable.

¶7. (C) Polo Democratico regional coordinator Timoteo Romero told us most other parties in Meta have ties to illegal armed groups, but denied alleged ties between some Polo candidates and the FARC. Romero said the situation in Meta is one of the worst in Colombia with high levels of poverty, displacement, and unemployment. Most candidates running for mayor and governor were financed by local companies trying to secure government contracts. Still, Romero said the paramilitary demobilization has allowed the Polo to run candidates in races across the Department--something that was not possible in previous elections.

KEY RACES

¶8. (C) Meta Governor, Villavicencio Mayor, and Other Races:

--The leading candidates for governor are Maritza Martinez Aristizabal (Volvamos a Avanzar) and Diego Vasquez (U Party), both of which have large and well financed campaigns. Martinez is under investigation for paramilitary ties and corruption, and is married to ex-Governor (2001-03) and former-Senator Luis Carlos Torres. Torres resigned from the Senate on October 8, 2007, after the Supreme Court formally charged him with paramilitary ties. Torres is widely considered to be the political kingmaker in Meta.

--For Mayor, Tania Jaramillo Garcia (U Party) and Eddy Baquero Garcia (Elija Bien) are leading a pack of ten candidates, polling 30% and 25% of the vote, respectively.

Baquero is the wife of the ex-mayor and owns a local sewage company. The company allegedly provides discounts to residents who promise their votes to Baquero.

--Candidates in rural areas face pressure from the FARC or other criminal groups, but a new GOC security presence is allowing free campaigning in many areas for the first time in decades. In the municipalities of Vista Hermosa, Puerto Rico, La Macarena and Uribe, traditionally FARC-held areas that were part of the demilitarized zone (despeje) created by President Pastrana in 1999, mayors spent most of their time in Villavicencio due to threats. Still, recent military offensives in the Macarena region allowed some mayors to return to their towns. In October, the Police opened a station in La Julia, a former FARC logistics hub in Uribe municipality, which will allow citizens the chance to vote free of FARC influence for the first time in memory.

GOC OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

¶9. (U) GOC elections officials in Meta explained that the GOC is investigating voter manipulation and providing security to threatened candidates throughout the department. Still, the GOC's ability to provide security in the vast, rural, and sparsely populated zone--which remains a main center of FARC activity in the country--is limited. Villavicencio Police Commander Colonel Pablo Emilio Gomez said the Police are providing security to six candidates facing the most serious threat. He did not have the manpower to respond to every one of the 140 requests for protection that he had received from across the Department. Gomez suspected that most political parties have surpassed campaign spending limits. Officials also told us they do not have enough investigators to hold parties to campaign finance spending limits or investigate alleged violations.

¶10. (U) National Registrar Office representative Generoso Puche said civil servants assigned to Meta from other regions to process voter registration, provide training to government observers and political parties, and oversee polls and voting stations, arrived in mid-September. The GOC is assigning individuals from other regions to Meta to prevent local fraud. He also requested additional election observers during the official vote count, which begins on October 30. Puche explained that the Fiscalia is investigating several candidates for corruption and vote buying--though investigations may not produce results prior to the elections.
Brownfield